

FORUM



Student-led demonstration, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, February 4, 2015. Overpass Light Brigade, Joe Brusky photographer. Source: overpasslightbrigade.org/love-light-for-uw-fight-the-cuts/.

Anthropologists in/of the neoliberal academy

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Let our Profs be Profs

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ABSTRACT: This contribution traces the impact of research and teaching audit on university life in UK. It focuses on how the audit regimes generate an entrepreneurial subjectivity among academics, thereby transforming what it means to be a “Prof”. It argues that anthropology has a role to play in drawing attention to the significance of these transformations of subjectivity.

On May 3rd 2016, an organisation called Let Our Kids Be Kids called a national strike of primary age (5-11 years) school children in England, in protest at the increased pressures of schooling in contemporary England. The main target of the day-long strike was assessment, and particularly the so-called “SATs” tests which children take at ages 6/7 and 10/11. Ostensibly designed as audit – to test schools, rather than pupils – Let Our Kids Be Kids nevertheless argued – with the support of considerable anecdotal evidence – that children found SATs increasingly stressful, and that they were stifling creativity in the classroom, as teachers increasingly “teach to test”. More significantly, though, Let Our Kids Be Kids points towards a more general problem, of a primary education system in the grips of a stifling audit regime that threatens to generate a particular type of perverse subjectivity, at the cost of a more healthy one – of “being Kids”.

A similar audit regime prevails in the UK’s universities, where the requirements of accountability and “quality assurance” generate an equally unhealthy subjectivity among academics. The technologies of audit generate technologies of management and self-management that refashion subjectivities in alignment with the values of individualism, entrepreneurialism and market competition. Such is the nature of neoliberalism (Ganti 2014: 94). Many of us recognise in this neither the people we wanted or expected to become when we started our academic career, nor ourselves, in our activities. The challenge of the neoliberal university is that of “being a Prof”.

Since the 1980s, successive UK governments have pushed for increased accountability and marketization in higher education. Under the banner of “quality assurance”, a series of frameworks or “exercises” have been established to audit both teaching and research.

In research, this began in 1986 with the “research selectivity exercise”, which became the “research assessment exercise” (RAE) and latterly the “research excellence framework” (REF). They were initially designed to guide the allocation of general re-

search funding – the so-called QR or “quality related” funding that is not linked to particular projects. However, as QR funding decreases in real terms (Ruckenstein, Smith and Owen 2016), they are increasingly significant only to establish league tables of departments and universities, or as what some people refer to as a “beauty contest”. Research quality is measured in terms of three factors: the quality of publications, as judged by peers – but increasingly through citation and impact indices; the research environment, in which the main factor is research income from non-QR sources (foundations, research councils etc.); societal impact – this is the measurable effect that a piece of research has had upon wider society or culture.

In each case, what started out as a retrospective “stock-taking” of achievement and quality is now a driver of entrepreneurial research activity. Publications, or “outputs”, are targeted towards higher status, higher profile journals; the acquisition of research funding has become an end in itself, rather than a means to an end of generating research; and the pursuit of societal impact has become a central driver of research design, as grant applicants are now required to “plan for impact”. Not only have these drivers become commonplace, their hegemonic purchase has made them “common sense”, in Gramsci’s terms. They are seen as unquestionable: who could possibly argue against wanting to publish your work in the “best” journals, wanting to get more research funding, or wanting to maximise the societal impact of your research?

Yet we know from Kuhn (1962) that science tends to be highly normative. The highest profile is not necessarily the most innovative, with genuinely new ideas more likely to appear on the fringes. We also know that the best ideas are not necessarily those that are likely to attract funding – again because they go against norms of accepted practice or established paradigms. As Ozga (1988) has argued, entrepreneurialism in research grant acquisition has driven scholars away from «Purposeful, but wide-ranging intellectual enquiry» (147), and towards management – of research funds, of funding applications, and of donor expectations. Moreover, as I have argued (Mitchell 2014), the impact agenda favours impacts of a particular type, driving us towards research that bolsters established policy – or worse, serves as propaganda for policy (Marginson 1993). The consequence is a standardisation and homogenisation of research on the one hand, and on the other, an increasingly frantic and anxious entrepreneurialism, as scholars compete over limited resources.

In teaching, audit began in the early 1990s with “teaching quality assessment” (TQA) and “subject review”, managed by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). These were initially institution-level, and subsequently subject-level reviews, involving self-evaluation, review of student evaluation, observation of teaching, and scrutiny of audit process. They were replaced in 2001 by a “lighter touch” Institutional Audit process in which universities manage their own teaching quality assurance, but have periodic visits from the QAA to audit their procedures. There are plans to replace this in 2017 with a “teaching excellence framework” (TEF).

Over the period of university teaching audit, measures of student satisfaction with teaching have become increasingly important, particularly so since the introduction of student tuition fees in 1998. Initially set at a maximum of £1,000, this was raised to £3,000 in 2004, and £9,000 in 2012, when central government removed its direct per capita funding of student tuition. This created an open market in student recruitment. To help prospective students make decisions about where to study, and to assure quality the National Student Survey was introduced in 2005. This annual survey of all final year students rates student “satisfaction” about their courses, on a range of issues including learning resources, careers guidance, feedback on work, and the quality of teaching. When the TEF is introduced, this will feed in to an overall ranking that will enable the higher-ranked institutions to charge yet higher tuition fees. For the moment, it is an important part of the published league tables that appear in the press and online, which form an important part of student recruitment.

With every undergraduate student now guaranteeing an income to the university of £27,000 over 3 years, there is considerable financial pressure to compete for every potential student both internally within universities and externally between them. With league tables and student satisfaction a significant factor in student choice, and with rising fees generating an increasingly consumer-like attitude among students who, now paying, expect “good service” and “value for money”, there is increased pressure to teach courses and modules that are not merely “interesting” or “important”, but “satisfying” and even “entertaining”. Again, the logic is in some ways unquestionable – why wouldn’t we want to provide the best possible teaching, and why wouldn’t we ask the students to make judgements about teaching quality? Yet as with research, the teaching audit regime generates a series of perverse outcomes, or drivers. In this case potentially “dumbing down” course content and presenting classes as “infotainment”. Not so much “teaching to test” as teaching to student evaluation, in order to maximise league-table scores and so better compete for students.

Evidence is starting to emerge about the levels of stress and anxiety being generated by this entrepreneurialisation of university life (Berg, Seeber 2016: 2ff). We might identify three inter-related sources of stress. First, the need to perform, to maximize, to generate outputs, income, impact and high levels of satisfaction. Second, the stress inherent in compromising principles that this generates. We are drawn towards tailoring our research interests towards those of the funders or of policy; and tailoring our teaching towards that which is satisfying. Maintaining principles in such a context can lead to contradiction and compromise. Third, there is the stress inherent in competition. Although academics have always competed – intellectually, and over jobs and resources – it is its collegiality and sense of collective endeavour that has attracted and sustained many careers – including my own – through difficult and stressful times. The neoliberal regime of audit, accountability, entrepreneurialism and competition cuts across this collegiality, producing an entrepreneurial subjectivity that is by definition competitive, rather than collegial. As a result, the very thing that holds us together is eroded.

Let Our Kids Be Kids attracted widespread media attention, and support from diverse public commentators. As I write, the University and Colleges Union (UCU), which represents academics and others in higher education, has its own campaign, involving a series of one-day strikes and a “work to contract” designed to disrupt university business. The primary grievances are an inadequate pay deal, the casualization of university contracts, and the gender pay-gap. These are all important – indeed vital – targets for action. Yet for many the focus on the specific fails to capture the more generalised grievance that not just our work and our conditions, but our very subjectivities, have been transformed.

I am not sure that a Let Our Profs Be Profs campaign would have any purchase in the public imagination. Fighting against, or to preserve, something as apparently nebulous as “subjectivity” is going to be a difficult task. Yet as anthropologists, we need to find ways to communicate this most central of messages in the anthropology of neoliberalism – that the transformation of subjectivity is not a “soft” project, but the hard edge of neoliberalism. We need to do this not just for our Kids, but also for our Profs.

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